

Apes have rights too, court rules

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The orangutan named Sandra sits in her enclosure at the Buenos Aires Zoo in Argentina, Dec. 22, 2014. An Argentine court has ruled that Sandra, who has spent 20 years at the zoo, is entitled to some legal rights enjoyed by humans. Photo: AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko

A court in Argentina has decided that an ape has the same rights as a human. It is the first time a court has ruled that.

Human rights were granted to a female orangutan. She lives at the Buenos Aires Zoo in Argentina.

The ruling will change the life of the orangutan forever. It also may help to set other animals free.

The orangutan is named Sandra. In Argentina, Sandra now has the right to life, liberty and freedom from harm. Animals like orangutans are primates. So are monkeys and humans.

An Object No More

Before the ruling, primates other than humans were considered objects, said Andrés Gil Dominguez. He called the ruling "historic."

Dominguez is a lawyer with an animal rights group. His group filed the court case for Sandra. It said that she had been denied her freedom for no reason.

The court will now try to find Sandra a home outside the zoo. Sandra was born at a zoo in Germany in 1986. She has lived at the Buenos Aires Zoo for 20 years. The courts will now put together a committee of experts. They will try to find another home for Sandra. She is getting older, so she will have to be healthy enough to travel to be moved.

Interest in freeing Sandra started in 2012. Then, the people who ran the Buenos Aires Zoo considered sending the ape to a sanctuary, or safe place for animals. But the group never took any action.

Sandra's case will likely energize other legal efforts for primates. Since they are so close to human primates, it is crazy that they "are still in captivity in prison," said Aldo Giúdice. He studies primates at the University of Buenos Aires.

Apes Are Individuals

Before Sandra's case, other legal claims were filed for zoo primates in Argentina. Outside of Argentina, there was a case in 2005 for a chimpanzee named Suiça. The chimp lived in a zoo in Brazil, but died before the case could be judged.

In 2012, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) tried to use the U.S. Constitution's 13th Amendment to gain freedom for orcas, also known as killer whales. The 13th Amendment ended slavery.

In 2013, the Nonhuman Rights Project started legal cases to free four chimpanzees in New York state. The cases were rejected, but the group is fighting the decision. The group wants "imprisoned nonhuman animals to be returned" to where they would live in nature, said Steven Wise, president of the organization. Jane Goodall is a member of the organization and is famous for studying primates in the wild.

Studies by Goodall, Dian Fossey and others show that great apes are like people, Giúdice said.

Scientific studies have shown that apes can feel and think through problems just like humans, and also think of themselves as individuals, he said. We cannot "let them suffer in prison," Giúdice said.